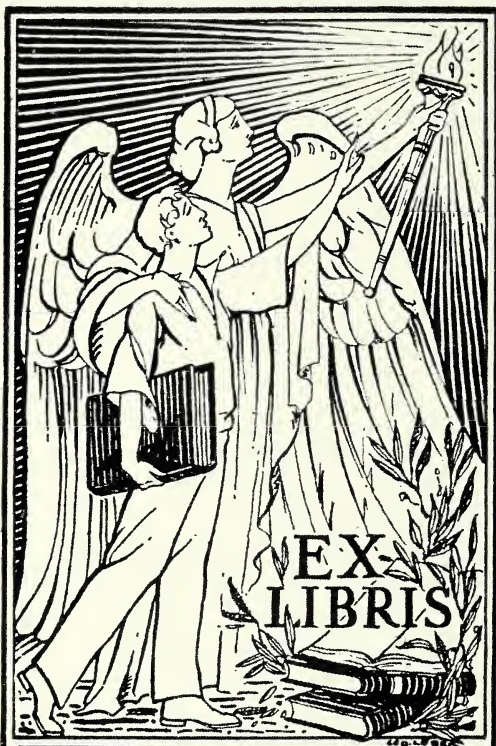


CARLTON ELDRIDGE MAKES MUSIC

Matilda Rose McLaren

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**HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**

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# Carlton Eldridge Makes Music

*A clear case of the blind leading the sighted*

By MATILDA ROSE McLAREN  
Condensed from the *Magnificat*\*



**I**T WAS A CRISP December vesper afternoon, and a downtown church in Springfield, Ill., was filled to capacity. The Oratorio society, about to present Handel's *Messiah*, made its way down the center aisle; then took its place before the altar. This society offers voices from many choirs; and it was not surprising that the tenor soloist was new to us. Confidently he left the choir ranks, took his place, and with dedication and devotion gave us: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."

"Did you ever hear such a voice?" I whispered to my pew-mate. "He doesn't sound the least bit nervous; but look, his hands keep working." Then I realized the artist was reading Braille. Quickly I consulted my program: Tenor soloist, Carlton Eldridge.

During intermission, my companion volunteered, "Mr. Eldridge is head of the Voice department at

Junior college. My daughter is in some of his classes. She says he's given more than 700 concerts from Ontario to New Orleans. He has sung these *Messiah* solos more than 50 times, even with the Chicago Symphony and the Apollo club.

"He never uses a cane or dog, and says he hopes to prove that 'blindness is not a handicap, just an inconvenience.'"

One has but to visit a Springfield Junior college chorus rehearsal to understand what Carlton Eldridge's students mean when they say, "Five minutes after you've met him, you forget he's blind." The 43-year-old instructor takes the stairs to his 2nd-floor classroom two at a time. Firmly he walks to the piano, removes the cover, and starts informal chats with his young people, several of whom put chairs in order or distribute songbooks.

His call to order is a simple, "O.K." He raises his hand, and

\*Sisters of Mercy, Manchester, N. H. May, 1955. Copyright 1955, and reprinted with permission.

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gives the student accompanist her signal. Down comes the chord, and all over the room young people take their pitch and go into the warming-up number.

By the time it is finished, every one is in front of his own chair, and 40 pairs of eyes watch for their cue to be seated. Not until then does their leader whip out his little Braille notebook to call the roll, answered by Protestant and Catholic, colored and white; by young people from many states, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Roll call over, the group really settles down for business.

"You five girls across the front row here, let's have *one* tone. I got five then." "Tenors, you're giving me a tiny bit too much." "I know you fellows in the back row are loaded, but let's not jingle coins." "Girls, don't cut off before I do." "Sopranos, page 6, fifth measure, *crescendo!*" He expects their best, and gets it.

With these freshmen and sophomores he puts on modern operas such as *Down in the Valley*, *Solomon and Balkis*, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. He was recently commended in *International Musician* (March, 1954). Admittedly, the youngsters do not put on professional productions, but they have been exposed to good music, and for many it's their only opportunity.

Carlton Eldridge has fewer discipline problems than many a sighted

teacher. Students say, "He's strict but friendly. During operetta season he expects us, like athletes, to get enough rest, and has been known to check student hangouts."

Everyone enjoys visiting with the Eldridges at 1111 N. 2nd St. You are immediately impressed with the neatly kept lawn, the screened front porch with sunshine-yellow linoleum. On one side, well out of pedestrian range, are the wheel toys of active children.

Your host, a man 5 feet, 10 inches tall, greets you with a hearty handshake, efficiently relieves you of your wraps, and deposits them in a closet. Then he proudly introduces his family: "My wife, Blythe; my daughter, Bonnie; my son, David."

Which, we wondered, is his chair? He sensed our uneasiness, and said, "Just take any seat which looks comfortable," and remained standing until we were all seated. Then he helped himself to an unoccupied rocker. The sound of our voices told him where we were. "I think you'll find that blue one very comfortable," he said, and Blythe laughed.

"He should know," she said. "He upholstered it." If ever love for a mate and pride in his achievements showed in a wife's face, it was in Blythe Eldridge's.

Bonnie, eight years old, with her long curls and mischievous blue eyes, could pose as the typical Irish colleen. She says, "Next thing dad-

dy makes will be a cabinet for my character dolls." David, five, dark-haired and all boy, is anxious to share his cars.

A little lady appeared. Instantly, Carlton was on his feet. "May I present my mother, here on a visit from Lansing?"

The gray-haired, 82-year-old woman looked lost in an average chair. She weighs under 100 pounds, but it's very evident she has tons of energy yet to spend. Her cornflower-blue eyes have seen hardships few of us will ever experience, but her Clooney Irish ancestry provided the stamina to see them through.

"We never knew, for sure, what caused Carlton's blindness," she said. "We were living in Auburn, Ind., when my husband died. I was 37, left with three boys. Carlton was seven weeks old.

"On the very night of the funeral, I noticed one of baby's eyes was watery. I took him to the doctor next day. He didn't think it would amount to much; suggested that maybe he'd poked himself with a finger. In time, I could tell that the baby was seeing with only one eye. When Carlton was five, somebody hit him on his good eye with an icy snowball, and that spring he'd crawl close to dandelions to tell me, 'I *can* see the posy!' but when I saw him step on a baby chicken, I knew his good eye had gone out too."

"Do you remember any baby-

General Melvin Maas, the blind chairman of the President's Committee to Employ the Physically Handicapped, was speaking to a convention recently. "Of course, I'm handicapped myself," he said. The crowd looked sad for him, but then he added, "I have false teeth."

Earl Wilson in the Minneapolis  
*Tribune* (9 May '55).

hood scenes?" I asked Mr. Eldridge.

"Yes. Sky, dandelions, a picture of Jesus in one of my storybooks, and certain birds. A baking-soda company used to enclose bird pictures in each box. I saved those and begged them from neighbors. I still have them—the one tangible thing left from my sighted life.

"Nature study remains one of our hobbies. There's nothing like two or three days in the woods to bring you close to God and soothe 'city nerves.' I collect bird songs, and Blythe gathers insects and flowers."

When she realized her baby was absolutely sightless, Mother Eldridge enrolled him at Michigan School for the Blind. Soon, she learned that boarding students were dependent on each other. They would, for instance, hold hands to cross streets, chain fashion.

"That was not for my boy," she said, with her chin up. So, she enrolled him as a day student. Nights,

while she stood over the ironing board, he recited his lessons to her. Today he sings fluently in German, French, Italian, Spanish; laboriously in Hebrew. While she expected his grades to stay on a par with those of full-time students, she also insisted that he keep their apartment neat.

"Why don't you use a dog or cane?" I asked our host.

"A dog couldn't read house numbers or bus names for me. That's all the help I need."

To temper him with self-reliance took more courage than most mothers could muster. By the time Carlton was ready for high school, the two older boys were graduated as sanitary engineers, and mother was nearing 60. She exposed Eldridge to piano lessons, which he didn't appreciate until at a student concert, when he was 14, he was introduced to Tchaikovsky. Suddenly, music had new meaning. Also, she rented a plot of ground, and told him, "As head of the house, you'll have to put in a garden." He raised enough vegetables not only for table use, but for canning as well.

Leonard J. Chard, who was an Eldridge contemporary and is now director of music, told me, "Carlton started his college studies at Michigan State intending to teach organ and piano. But one day he was singing triads in elementary music. By chance, the late Fred Patton, formerly of the Metropoli-

tan Opera, then in charge of voice at the college, overheard him. That was the start of his voice career. Before, he'd avoided even the high school chorus."

As he was building up concert engagements, Eldridge developed his own method for sight reading. Basically, this method was placing words and music in such an order in a notebook that he could cue his solo entrances. Developing this method of vocal scoring in Braille was to be very helpful later when he decided to go into choral directing.

When the opportunity presented itself, he had not thought much of being a conductor. But he met the challenge by taking a few lessons from Keith Stein at Michigan State college, before taking over the directorship of St. Mary's Cathedral choir.

Shortly after undertaking this position, he organized the Choralettes, a group of business women who wished to sing for fun. After he launched them, he was called upon to help organize a mixed choir of Negroes.

Reminiscing about this period, Eldridge explains, "I made my first of 700 concert appearances in 1938. In 1942, St. Mary's needed a director, and I was simply told, 'Get yourself a few conducting lessons!' I'm not as smooth a conductor as I would like to be, because I haven't had enough training, only from Monday to Thursday of that



week; the rest was instinct. However, I stayed there for eight years."

Those eight years were among the most momentous in his life. While practicing on the organ, sometimes nine hours a day, he learned that a blind person must make his own copies of the masters. For instance, he loves Bach; but not much is available in Braille. Today, he still uses the little Braille slate with which he started in 1st grade, but his collection includes almost 1,000 copies of choral numbers and 100 solos.

It takes an hour to copy the melody of an ordinary song in Braille, which is written in one direction, read in another. (He can read it upside down, as a group at St. Mary's juvenile pranksters learned at rehearsal when Mass music went on uninterrupted!) He once spent 100 hours copying the score and words of *The Passion according to St. Matthew*, only to learn upon arrival that the host choir was using a different edition. There was nothing to do but copy it all over.

Eldridge was graduated from the Institute in 1929, enrolled as organ major, and graduated with high honors from Michigan State in 1934, one year after his name had been "discovered" by Professor Patton. He took his Public School Music degree in 1935, and his Master's in Music with distinction in 1949.

Carlton's "good angel," his wife,

came into his life through their mutual love of music. She was a Choralette. Blythe Axford, a product of Ann Arbor, was teaching in the elementary grades of Lansing. They were married 11 years ago, when each was 32 years old. The going wasn't easy. While Carlton was working on his graduate degrees, he was on the extra teaching staff of Michigan State college, and tuned pianos. Voice lessons netted him exactly \$15 the first year. He started to give recitals, on a collection-plate basis. The first one netted \$6.15; the second, \$4.20.

Carlton tried radio. The Michigan State Music federation became interested. Soon the young couple were in position to purchase a little house.

As we sat looking at pictures of Bonnie's 8th birthday party, the telephone rang. A minute later, the man of the house turned to his wife, "They want to know whether you can launder the choir collars before tonight's performance?"

"Why, yes," answered his helpmeet; "but they'll have to do their own ironing." She explained, "I'd finish them, but we're due for three road concerts this week end. Of course, the children and accompanist ride with us. That calls for a bit of preparation. Also, we'll have the annual strawberry festival for the music department in our home next Wednesday."

"The entire department?"

"Oh, I'll do it the easy way; just

bake up about ten dozen short-cakes, stem gallons of berries, brew crocks of iced tea, and let them help themselves."

Male accompanists tell us that when traveling on a train Eldridge asks only one question, "Is the men's room fore or aft?" From then on the seasoned traveler is on his own. He handles all expenses, folding paper money of given denominations crosswise, lengthwise, one-third over or not at all. Fellow travelers are astonished when he assembles his razor, shaves, and packs his kit more rapidly than they.

Asked, "How come you never bump into things?" Mr. Eldridge explained, "Anyone who doesn't resent blindness can achieve a sense of approach by listening to reverberations. I get them perfectly on leather heels, and I never wear rubber. One chair in the middle of a large classroom might throw me; three, I sense. When walking on unfamiliar ground, I take my companion's arm, never vice versa. His reflexes tell me when we approach a curb or stairway."

When the children were babies, in common with many fathers, Eldridge delighted in throwing them into the air, catching them, and hearing them squeal for joy; in cooking for them when Blythe was sick. Now, he gets a kick out of taking them to movies and museums; teaching David to do carpenter work. When the family

is on tour, he listens to Blythe describe the majesty of mountains, the peace of meadows; then he keeps the experience alive for them by recalling the trips.

The Eldridges believe in doing for themselves. Blythe even made the awnings for their house.

Mother Annunciata, head of the Music department at the college, considers her voice teacher a real find. "When he first came to us," she explains, "Blythe gave him one campus-geography lesson. After that, no one would affront him by offering assistance. You know, sometimes blind folks must develop patience with sighted people.

"His application came to us through an agency, and I had read a short article about his achievements in *Music News*. When I saw how many return concert engagements he'd had, I sent for his transcript. It was almost straight A. I just knew he was a good bet, and we've never changed our minds."

Carlton Eldridge holds memberships in Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, American Guild of Organists, and the National Association of Teachers of Singing. He has filled engagements in different states on the same day. His former students are teaching in colleges and singing in Metropolitan areas such as Detroit, New York, and Boston. He doesn't have to hope to prove that "blindness is not a handicap, just an inconvenience." He has already proved it!



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